

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, Russia perpetuated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Authorities criminalize the activities of several peaceful religious organizations by designating them as “extremist,” “undesirable,” or “terrorist,” despite a lack of evidence or even specific allegations that those accused promoted, participated in, or plotted violence. Approximately 190 Jehovah’s Witnesses remained in pretrial detention, imprisoned, under house arrest, or subjected to forced labor for their religious activities. In September, a court sentenced Jehovah’s Witnesses [Ivan Neverov](#) and [Mikhail Shevchuk](#) to seven and six and a half years in prison, respectively, for holding religious meetings and discussing religious literature. In March, 67-year-old Jehovah’s Witness Valery Bailo died in prison after authorities allegedly failed to provide him with adequate medical care.

Hundreds of Muslims, including Crimean Tatars, [remained](#) imprisoned on lengthy sentences ranging from 10 to 24 years for possessing religious literature and discussing religion and politics as alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir. The government also prosecuted and imprisoned Allya Ayat members, Tablighi Jamaat missionaries, followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Scientologists, and Protestants with perceived foreign connections. In July, a court sentenced Falun Gong practitioner [Natalia Minenkova](#) to four years in prison for her religious activities.

Russia enforced its religiously repressive legal system on the Ukrainian territories it illegally occupies, maintaining bans on certain religious groups, imposing fines for so-called illegal missionary activities, raiding houses of worship, seizing religious properties, and detaining religious leaders and community members. Russian de facto authorities often commit religious freedom violations to facilitate the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in these territories. At least 47 Christian religious

leaders have been killed, and at least 700 houses of worship and other religious sites—mostly Christian—have been damaged or destroyed since Russia’s February 2022 invasion. In April, a Russian military court sentenced five Crimean Tatar Muslims to 14 years in prison each and another to 11 years in prison for their alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir membership. In May, Russia designated Crimean Tatar journalist and human rights defender Lutfiye Zudiyeva as a “foreign agent” over her reporting on the repression of predominately Muslim Crimean Tatars in Russian-occupied Crimea. Imprisoned Crimean Tatar Muslims reported experiencing torture, medical neglect, forced beard shavings, the confiscation of religious materials, prayer bans, pork-filled food, and other ill treatment.

Russian authorities have fined, designated as “foreign agents,” and imprisoned religious leaders and others for expressing opposition on religious grounds to Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In June, a court sentenced Buddhist leader [Ilya Vasilyev](#) to eight years in prison over a 2022 anti-war social media post. An appeals court later canceled Vasilyev’s sentence and ordered a new trial. In September, a court sentenced Protestant pastor [Nikolay Romanyuk](#) to four years in prison for a 2022 anti-war sermon. Authorities cracked down on perceived offensive expression toward religion. In June, a court sentenced a comedian to more than a year of forced labor for jokes perceived as offensive toward Christianity.

Russia’s religion law penalizes broadly defined “missionary activities” that lack government approval, including public and private religious gatherings. Authorities across the country banned at least ten Council of Churches Baptist communities and sealed their church building in Kurganinsk over their refusal to formally register their activities with local governments. These congregations remained banned at the end of the reporting period.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Russia as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa

authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;

- Raise religious freedom issues in every bilateral engagement with Russian officials; and
- Allocate funds to programs that document and/or report on religious freedom and related human rights violations in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the National Endowment for Democracy.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass legislation addressing the deteriorating religious freedom conditions in

Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine to assist those fleeing state persecution for their freedom of religion or belief and to combat Russian propaganda and antisemitism; and

- Examine U.S. policy toward religious freedom in Russia through hearings, briefings, reports, and other actions, considering the impacts of the withdrawal of U.S. financial support for human rights reporting mechanisms and developing additional U.S. responses to address religious freedom conditions in Russia.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Prosecuting Blasphemy in Russia](#)
- **Country Update:** [Russia’s Persecution of Religious Groups and FoRB Actors](#)
- **Hearing:** [Freedom of Religion or Belief in Russia](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

As of [2023](#), 72 percent of Russia's population identified as Orthodox Christian, seven percent as Muslim, five percent as atheist, and 13 percent as having no religious affiliation. Several other religious groups each constituted one percent or less of the population, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, Hindus, followers of indigenous religions, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Latter-day Saints, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Scientologists, and Tengrists. Russia's religion law defines only Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as "traditional" religions. The government views independent religious groups who refuse to align with the state's political agenda as "non-traditional" and treats them as a threat to national security.

Legal Developments

In 2025, Russia instituted new laws and designations negatively impacting religious freedom. Authorities increased administrative penalties and made it easier to bring criminal proceedings for violating the country's "foreign agents" law. The government has designated several religious leaders as so-called foreign agents for publicly opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including in 2025 Father Aleksandr Khmelyov, a priest from the Old Catholic Church, and Orthodox priests [Ioann Kurmoyarov](#), Andrey Kordochkin, and Kirill Govorun. In July, authorities made searching online for state-recognized "extremist" materials an administrative offense. The government has banned several religious materials as "extremist," and in 2025 recognized as "extremist" the Local Church's *The New Testament: The Restoration*, among other works. Authorities additionally banned more organizations as "undesirable," including Brigham Young University, which is affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Peace unto All, which provides assistance to anti-war Russian Orthodox clergy.

International Bodies and Mechanisms

United Nations (UN) and European human rights bodies repeatedly underscored Russia's religious freedom and related human rights violations. In February, a UN special rapporteur called on Russia to provide immediate medical care to Crimean Tatar activist [Emir-Usein Kuku](#). In March, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) [ordered](#) Russia to financially compensate applicants across 16 cases

for violating their rights to freedom of religion or belief. In May, a UN Human Rights Council report on the human rights situation in Russian-occupied Ukraine [highlighted](#) Russia's religious freedom restrictions. In July, the ECHR [found](#) Russia had intimidated, harassed, and persecuted religious groups in Russian-occupied Ukraine from 2014 to 2022. In both [September](#) and [October](#), UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation Mariana Katzarova released reports documenting Russia's systematic repression of civil society, highlighting Jehovah's Witnesses, anti-war religious leaders, alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members, Said Nursi followers, and Tablighi Jamaat missionaries.

Key U.S. Policy

The administration of President Donald J. Trump prioritized reengagement with the Russian government, with the objectives of creating proper conditions for U.S.-Russian normalization and mediating an end to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In February, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio [met](#) with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Saudi Arabia for the first in-person, high-level meeting between the two countries since 2022. In August, President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Anchorage, Alaska. U.S. Special Envoy Steven Witkoff traveled to Russia on several occasions to meet with officials there, including President Putin. The Trump administration additionally [pressured](#) nations to end their purchases of Russian oil and imposed [sanctions](#) on two of Russia's largest oil companies.

The Trump administration [paused](#) or [eliminated](#) programs, including [U.S. funded international media](#) that documented religious freedom violations in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine. Additionally, the U.S. Department of State in April eliminated an office that had previously reported on Russia's weaponization of [antisemitism](#) and [false war narratives](#), including against religious minorities.

In October, the U.S. Senate introduced a bipartisan bill, Designating the Russian Federation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism Act ([S.2978](#)), in response to Russia's abduction of Ukrainian children and attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure amid its ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

The U.S. Department of State last [redesignated](#) Russia as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.